Return to PDC

December 16, 1968

Note for the record

Mr. Dan Ellsberg of RAND met with a number of Department officers on December 12 to discuss "some lessons of Vietnam." Mr. Ellsberg, who once worked for the Office of International Security Affairs in the Department of Defense and later spent some two years in various advisory roles in Vietnam, is currently doing a historical study of American involvement in Vietnam based on official records. In his presentation to the small group of Department officers, he emphasized two conclusions of his study: (1) American military and civilian officials at all levels have "failed to learn from experience" in coping with the problems of Vietnam; and (2) for years official U.S. reporting on Vietnam has been in large part erroneous and systematically and sometimes deliberately biased. Most of the discussion following Mr. Ellsberg's opening presentation centered on the degree of accuracy and balance of these judgments and their implications.

Unlearned lessons. One of Mr. Ellsberg's two main points was that Americans have not been able to profit from their own experience in Vietnam: lessons "had to be learned over and over again" because there has not been an effective "organizational memory" to record them or an efficient way to transmit them. His illustrations ranged from the smallest local operations of military units to larger political decisions.

Although several of the officers present questioned whether the performance was as bad as Mr. Ellsberg pictured it, there was consensus that the problem of learning, and transferring learned experience, was particularly acute in Vietnam.

In the course of the discussion, Mr. Ellsberg or others suggested a number of possible reasons for this: (1) the shortage -- indeed the virtual absence, relatively speaking -- of official or academic experts on Vietnam; the rapid turnover in military and civilian personnel; the lack of adequate training programs for new military and civilian officers sent to the field (with the result that most had to rediscover directly what their predecessors already knew); and inadequate or tendentious reporting -- both laterally (to units facing comparable problems) and vertically (to higher military and civilian echelons).

Unreliable counsellors. The last point -- that reports from Vietnam were "almost from the beginning" systematically and sometimes consciously slanted to reflect the expectations of superiors rather than "reality" -- was Mr. Ellsberg's second and more controversial theme. In looking over the record, he said, he was struck not only by the accumulation of errors but by the fact that the errors were overwhelmingly in one direction: there seemed almost a "conspiracy of optimism" in reporting situations in Vietnam and estimating probable developments. Although he did not spare

higher officials in Washington from criticism, he said that on a number of occasions these officials simply did not have "accurate" information on which to base realistic policies.

Mr. Ellsberg drew most of his illustrations from the military, but he said that to a varying extent the pattern of incomplete or tendentious or even "deliberately false" reporting also characterized civilian officials and agencies operating in Vietnam. In the case of the military, he mentioned or alluded to severe sanctions imposed on officers who violated the norms of "optimism" in reporting a situation or assessing programs.

He had a few favorable remarks, in contrast, on the work of some Foreign Service officers in the field and for INR; and he noted that the national estimates were generally more balanced, and in retrospect more accurate, than most other types of documents. But "who paid any attention to them?"

Discussion. The discussion stimulated or provoked by Mr. Ellsberg's remarks ranged widely, but returned repeatedly to three main questions:

(1) How accurate was the picture sketched by the speaker? Mr. Ellsberg's general point -- that the "realities" of Vietnam were not properly reported or assessed -- was not seriously disputed. But some of the officers present wondered whether he had not overstated the case, especially in his analysis of the "reasons" for erroneous or biased reporting. Mr. Ellsberg emphasized the limitations of reporting "through channels" by people who were operationally responsible for the matters being reported or evaluated; and he stressed the "corruption" inherent in a system that tended to punish objective reporting in a "deteriorating" situation. Others in the group suggested that some other factors might also be important in explaining the communication failures of the Vietnam case -- including, for example, "normal and honest" differences in perception and opinions and a strain of optimism characteristic of American culture.

(2) How unique is the Vietnam pattern? According to Mr. Ellsberg, the limitations of "official" reporting through a "chain of command" are probably not unique to the Vietnam case: they are probably characteristic of bureaucratic behavior generally but have been highlighted by the particular history of the Vietnam experience, which has revealed more clearly and dramatically than is usual in foreign policy the gap between official perceptions and reality. Some officers in the group were inclined to agree with this observation; others were wary of generalizing beyond the immediate case.

(3) What are some implications? Mr. Ellsberg's comments prompted several of his listeners to ask about possible ways of improving the quality of information required for policy and operations. Mr. Ellsberg himself stressed the importance of separating operations and analysis -- in contrast to much current practice in military and civilian agencies. He and others noted also the value of non-official sources of information and

analysis, such as the press and formal social research. But press reports on Vietnam, he noted, were normally discounted by higher officials when they conflicted with official versions of the situation. And as for research, there has been "precious little" on Vietnam and some of the contract research financed by government agencies suffered from the same defects as official communications.

The meeting, and a subsequent smaller luncheon session, remained on this pessimistic note.

Participants

1. E. Raymond Platig	(Chairman) Director, Office of External Research
2. Herbert Block	Special Assistant for Economic Affairs, Office of Research and Analysis for USSR and Eastern Europe
3. John Bowling	Coordinator, Political Studies, School of Professional Studies, Foreign Service Institute
4. Donald Dumont	Chief, Research Review Division, Office of External Research
5. Frank Golino	Coordinator for University Area Studies, Foreign Service Institute
6. Grant Hilliker	Special Assistant for Substantative Information Systems, Office of the Under Secretary
7. John Noon	Coordinator for Area and Country Study, Foreign Service Institute
8. Lee Stull	Member, Policy Planning Council
9. Myrtle Thorne	Deputy Chief, Research Review Division, Office of External Research
10. William Trainor	Special Assistant to the Director, Office of External Research
11. Pio Uliassi	Chief, Academic Relations Division, Office of External Research
12. Seymour Weiss	Director, Office of Strategic and Functional Research, Bureau of Intelligence and Research

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